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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [RS](#) [MD](#) [BO](#) [LG](#)
SUBJECT: DAS KRAMER TALKS BELARUS, MOLDOVA AND RUSSIA WITH
LATVIA

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Tamir Waser, Reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d)

11. (C) Summary: In a productive series of meetings in Riga July 24, DAS David Kramer discussed Belarus, Moldova and Russia with key Latvian officials. Latvia is closely watching Belarus' relations with Russia and trying to improve people to people contacts. NGO representatives who work with Belarus believe that the internet is an underutilized tool for getting information into Belarus, especially to the younger generation. Latvia wants to increase its engagement in Moldova and use its own post-Soviet experience to help Moldova move closer to Europe. The GOL feels that recent small steps in its relations with Russia are due to the EU and U.S. keeping the issue on the table in discussions with Moscow. The Latvians greatly appreciated the visit for the opportunity to hold bilateral discussions on some of their highest priority foreign policy issues. End summary.

12. (U) EUR DAS David Kramer visited Riga July 24 and had meetings with MFA officials including State Secretary Normans Penke, U/S for bilateral relations Edgars Skuja, and Latvian Ambassador to Minsk Maira Mora. He also met with officials from the Latvian Transatlantic Organization (LATO) and the umbrella NGO group Open Belarus. Pol/Econ chief accompanied DAS Kramer as notetaker.

Belarus

13. (C) Ambassador Mora, who has just completed six months representing the Austrian presidency in Minsk, said that she felt we were at a critical juncture in Russian/Belarusian relations. Developments in the energy sector, especially negotiations of a new gas contract with Russia, would be a key indicator of what was happening. She reported that a source in the ministry of economics had told her that \$100 per 1,000 cubic meters was about the highest price Belarus could afford for gas. Additionally, an official in the MFA in Minsk had asked Mora to help us before Belarus loses its independence to Russia. While agreeing with Kramer that we needed to firmly oppose any Moscow-inspired referendums on union between the two countries, Mora said we should not exclude the possibility that Lukashenko might call a preemptory referendum to reject such a union and we would need to consider carefully how to respond to that. Asked about PM Sidorsky, Mora said he was running the government, but not the country. While some in the EU wanted to include him on the visa and/or financial bans, she advocated retaining him as person with whom the U.S. and EU could talk, especially as he is the main negotiator with Russia. .

14. (C) U/S Skuja said the lack of coordination between

members of the Belarusian opposition was disheartening. Mora went further, saying, &there is no longer an opposition in Belarus, they are just dissidents.⁸ Opposition, even underground, implies and requires some level of coordination, she argued, and that does not exist in Belarus.

15. (C) Skuja said that Latvia was focusing its efforts in Belarus on people-to-people contacts, with State Secretary Penke noting that Latvia is now waiving visa fees for Belarusians to encourage travel to Latvia. Latvia is focusing its assistance programs in Belarus on institution building and promoting a culture of democracy, according to Skuja. The GOL hopes to build links between municipalities in the two countries as part of its assistance programs. Kramer agreed with this approach, noting the importance of working with the people of Belarus while squeezing the regime.

16. (C) Kramer asked about ways to get information into Belarus. Mora said that initial indications are current efforts are having no visible effect on public opinion within Belarus. While Skuja said Latvia was keen to work with European Radio for Belarus (ERB), Mora said radio transmissions were &preaching to the converted⁸ in the border regions. She added that satellite TV was of little value both because of the prohibitive cost of access and the ability of the government to block it. She argued for greater use of printed products, including leaflets, distributed directly to people within Belarus, while noting the likely strong GOB reaction and the security issues for those involved in production and distribution. NGO reps in a separate meeting told Kramer that they agreed that print was the most effective, but most dangerous for those involved, means of information dissemination. They also saw some value to radio broadcasts, if they had greater reach than at present. The NGO reps suggested making greater use of the internet to carry radio broadcasts and other informational materials. While overall internet access in Belarus was only

around 30 percent, it was much higher among youth, the NGO reps felt. Open Belarus has tried using SMS text messages from Latvia to get messages into Belarus, but find the GOB can easily block those.

Moldova

17. (C) MFA State Secretary Penke and U/S Skuja highlighted Moldova as a place where Latvia is looking to do more. When PM Kalvitis travels there in early September, the Latvian President, PM and FM will all have been to Moldova in the space of a year. Penke stressed Latvia's willingness to share its post-Soviet transition experiences with Moldova and said they were especially focused on assisting in the areas of border control and customs. Skuja noted that it was the largest recipient of Latvian assistance in 2006 and likely would be again in 2007. Kramer agreed that Latvia had a positive story to share with Moldova as it moves closer to Europe and enthusiastically welcomed Latvia's engagement on border and customs issues. The EU border mission and the customs agreement with Ukraine were helping address the issues in Transnistria by squeezing the economic support for Smirnov, Kramer said. The Latvians fully agreed with Kramer on the need to stand firm against the proposed September referendum in Transnistria.

Russia

18. (C) Penke said that it was too early to tell if recent moves by Moscow signaled a real shift in Russian policy towards Latvia. Perhaps there would be some movement in September on signing several bilateral agreements, but it was still unclear. Penke stressed that the GOL feels that U.S. and EU pressure on Russia has been essential in improving the bilateral relationship.

19. (C) Comment: The Latvians genuinely appreciated the opportunity to consult and discuss bilaterally these countries, which are at the top of their foreign policy agenda. Although discussed in e-PINE and other fora with

U.S., the Latvians often feel overshadowed in those meetings by larger or more assertive participants. DAS Kramer's suggestion that a representative from EUR/ACE come for a more detailed discussion on assistance issues was warmly received as an indication that we are interested in working in partnership with the GOL on these issues. Ukraine, because of the uncertain and fluid situation there, came up very little in the discussions.

¶10. (U) DAS Kramer has cleared this cable.
Bailey